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Viewing cable 05PARIS6580, MFA AND ELYSEE UPBEAT ON CORE GROUP MINISTERIAL,

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
05PARIS6580	2005-09-26 16:03	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Paris

Appears in these articles:

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This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 006580

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/26/2015

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SUBJECT: MFA AND ELYSEE UPBEAT ON CORE GROUP MINISTERIAL,
CAUTIOUS ON SYRIA REGIME STABILITY

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary and comment: Elysee and MFA officials described the September 19 Lebanon Core Group ministerial as a success, and expressed relief that consideration of a draft UNSCR on arms transfers to Lebanon had been dropped from the agenda. GoF officials expressed similar satisfaction that military cooperation had been kept off the Core Group agenda and confirmed that a third French military assessment mission will go to Lebanon in October. Elysee officials commended PM Siniora's performance in New York and the concurrent isolation of President Lahoud at UNGA, and stressed that the GoF has no preferred candidate to replace Lahoud. The GoF maintains that any Lahoud successor should truly emanate from the Christian community and should be acceptable to Lebanon's Sunni community and regional countries, criteria which, in the French view, Aoun does not meet. On Syrian regime stability, MFA contacts remain typically more cautious than Elysee counterparts, who speculate that direct implication of Syria in the Mehlis report could result in fall of the Asad regime to Alawite strongmen, a Sunni overthrow, or further consolidation of power by President Bashar al-Assad. On the latter point, Elysee contacts speculate that Bashar could give up Rustom Ghazaleh and Ghazi Kanaan, but will draw the line at family members. Elysee contacts described the visit of Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) head Asif Shawkat to Paris as both unfortunate and part of regular bilateral consultations between security services; Elysee contacts claimed that the DST (internal security service) had not informed the Elysee in advance and that the DST chief was the only GoF official to receive Shawkat. End summary and comment.

LEBANON: CORE GROUP, UNSCR, LAHOUD SUCCESSOR,

¶12. (C) We met with Presidential Technical Advisor on Middle East/Americas Dominique Boche September 22 and separately with MFA DAS-equivalent for Egypt/Levant Herve Besancenot September 20 to review Lebanon and Syria developments. Both Boche and Besancenot described the September 19 Core Group ministerial as a success, judging Arab and Russian participation to have been particularly important. Boche described the Siniora's effective performance at the Core Group as an excellent complement to Lahoud's isolation at UNGA.

¶13. (C) While commending the Core Group success, both Boche and Besancenot referred to USG-GOF disagreements resolved prior to the September 19 meeting. Boche commended the U.S. for understanding that now was not the right moment for a draft UNSCR limiting arms transfers to state actors in Lebanon, noting that such a resolution would have undermined GOL cohesion as well as international consensus on Lebanon. Boche reiterated GoF reticence on sanctions in general, but conceded that the GoF was not closed to discussing possible Syria sanctions, particularly after issuance of the final Mehlis report. Besancenot was more negative on the draft UNSCR, noting GoF discomfort with the proposed mention of Iraq in the draft text, and reiterating that the Core Group should address Lebanon only. He stressed that we needed to move sequentially and put priority on UNSCR 1595 over UNSCR 1559; implementation of the former would help pave the way for the latter, with Hezbollah gradually losing justification for maintaining its military capacity.

¶14. (C) Boche and Besancenot expressed similar satisfaction that military cooperation was kept off the Core Group agenda. Boche noted that including military cooperation on the Core Group agenda would have given Hezbollah a pretext to accuse the international community of interference and to separate from the GoL. Boche confirmed that a third French military assessment mission would visit Lebanon in October, but did not provide a date.

15. (C) On possible candidates to replace President Lahoud, Boche stressed that the GoF was remaining cautious and had no preferred candidates. Rather than focusing on personalities, the GoF had identified two criteria: 1) the candidate should truly emanate from the Christian community (i.e., not be picked by Sa'ad Hariri); and 2) the candidate should be acceptable to Lebanon's Muslim community and countries of the region. The second requirement eliminated Michel Aoun as a valid contender, Boche concluded. He said he had no information about a possible Aoun visit to France, but confirmed that were the Free Patriotic Movement leader to visit, he would be received at the MFA only, as part of a deliberate GoF policy not to receive any presidential contenders at the Presidency. Boche expressed concern that Sa'ad Hariri might be tempted to seek a weak, easy to manage, elder Christian politician to replace Lahoud, which would be a huge mistake. Lebanon needed both the PM and President to play political roles; the President represented the aspirations, if not the existence, of the Maronite community and should not be reduced to a figurehead role.

SYRIA: IMPACT OF MEHLIS REPORT ON STABILITY, SHAWKAT VISIT

16. (C) On Syrian regime stability, Boche reiterated that the content of the final Mehlis report would be decisive. If the report established direct SARG responsibility for Hariri's assassination, Boche speculated that Bashar may give up second-tier officials up to the level of Interior Minister Ghazi Kanaan and former SMI Chief in Lebanon Rustom Ghazaleh, without touching brother-in law Asif Shawkat, in-laws the Makhlufs, or his brother Mahir. Boche added that he could not exclude any possibilities for regime stability after the Mehlis report; there could be a "palace coup," with other powerful Alawis taking over; the Alawites could lose control to the Sunnis, who lack leaders; or Bashar could seize the moment to consolidate his authority and marginalize others, as he has started to do since the last Ba'th party congress. Besancenot was more cautious than Boche in reiterating to us that the GoF did not want a "total destabilization" in Syria, nor did the GoF want isolation of Syria to lead to it increasing its "nuisance capacity" in the region.

17. (C) Boche stressed that Egypt and Saudi Arabia remained essential to the international effort to maintain the isolation of Syria. Egypt wanted to play a role and be useful, and Mubarak had agreed to receive Terje Roed-Larsen in direct response to a phone call from Chirac. The September 25 Bashar visit to Cairo would be another opportunity for Egypt to deliver a tough message to the Syrian leader. The Saudis were "a bit behind," in Boche's view, as King Abdullah was closer personally to Syria via his tribal and family connections. Boche described Saudi Arabia as not wanting to be seen as plotting against the Syrian regime, and therefore unwilling to receive Larsen in Riyadh. Boche speculated, though, that, in the end, Saudi Arabia would not mind having a Sunni government in Damascus "break the Shi'a arc" between Lebanon and Iran. Saudi ties to the Hariri family were also a positive factor; Saudi Arabia had been helpful at the time of the Syrian blockade of its border with Lebanon, offering use of the port of Yanbu for the transit of goods blocked at the border.

18. (C) Boche confirmed that SMI Chief Asif Shawkat had visited Paris and met with DST head Bosquet and no other GoF officials, before departing France. Boche described Shawkat's visit as part of long-standing liaison relationship between French and Syrian security services, and noted Shawkat usually visited France twice a year. Boche described timing for the visit as "unfortunate," and claimed that there was a lack of coordination within the GoF, with the Elysee learning of the visit only after Shawkat had arrived. He added that Shawkat has a sick child, which could have been another reason for the visit. Boche offered no details on the contents of Shawkat's discussions with the DST.

19. (C) COMMENT: The GoF appears satisfied with the Core Group ministerial, not only because it provided an opportunity to reaffirm international support for the GOL reform agenda, but because the GoF managed to keep a draft UNSCR and military cooperation off the agenda. While the GoF mantra remains, "UNSCR 1595 before UNSCR 1559," it remains unclear what happens after the Mehlis report is issued, with the MFA expressing typically more caution than the Elysee on prospects for SARG destabilization. End comment.
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